

Inclusive Education in Alberta

Providing context for implementation of *Action on Inclusion*

Each of us needs to belong. A sense of belonging is part of our business, social and personal interactions. We belong to sports teams, places of worship, community leagues and service clubs because doing so creates meaning in our lives. Feeling included shapes our identity, bolsters our self-esteem and fuels our personal growth.

Attitudes and practice, which are often unintentional, sometimes create division between groups. The same happens in classrooms, which are often a reflection of society as a whole.

The Setting the Direction Initiative

Alberta Education's *Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta* Initiative launched in 2008. The mandate for *Setting the Direction* was to create a new framework for special education in Grades 1 through 12. After 18 months and consultation with more than 7,000 Albertans, it became clear to the *Setting the Direction* steering committee that the mandate was too narrow. What started with a look at special education grew into something broader.

Consultation with Albertans told the committee that every student has unique needs, so their work shouldn't just focus on one group. Some students have profound and ongoing needs; others have short term and/or situation-based needs. The steering committee listened to Albertans and recognized that a two-stream education system—one that physically and socially isolates a certain population of students—whether they have a disability or delay, are gifted, are learning English as an additional language, have cultural differences, or are raised in foster care—is neither effective nor just.

In 2009, the Setting the Direction Steering Committee presented the Minister of Education with its framework and recommendations. They called for “one inclusive education system where each student is successful.” The framework provided suggestions of what needs to be different and identified that what inclusion means is as varied as the students themselves. For some students it means grouped programs based on specific needs, for others it means being in class with their age peers and having their instruction modified within the Alberta Programs of Study. For others, it's a mix of the two experiences. Within an inclusive education system, families will still have the opportunity to make choices among existing school authorities such as public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, designated special education private schools, private schools, charter schools, and home education programs.

In June 2010, the Government of Alberta provided its formal response to the *Setting the Direction* framework in which it accepted all 12 of the recommendations, which the response identified as strategic directions for it to implement. In the fall of 2010, inclusion was identified as part of government's Inspiring Action on Education initiative, and *Setting the Direction* was renamed *Action on Inclusion* to signal implementation of an inclusive education system.

An Inclusive Education System

The goal of an inclusive education system is to provide all students with the most appropriate learning environments and opportunities for them to best achieve their potential. Some have said, this is what should already be happening in education, and they're right. However, some children, youth and their families do not feel that they have the same opportunities as their peers.

In Alberta, inclusion in the education system is about ensuring that each student belongs and receives a quality education no matter their ability, disability, language, cultural background, gender, or age. For some, a provincial move to inclusive education will mean very little change, but for others the change will be more significant.

An inclusive education system is best realized when leadership is shared between school, home and family. Schools reflect the attitudes, beliefs and health of the communities they serve and must be equipped to reflect inclusive practice.

Within government, implementation of an inclusive education system is being led by an Inclusive Education Cross-Ministry Team under the shared leadership of the Ministries of Education, Children and Youth Services and Health and Wellness. The team also includes representatives from Alberta Health Services and the College of Alberta School Superintendents. The work of the team will focus on ensuring that children, youth and their families are supported in the child's education success. Their work will determine what needs to happen to have an inclusive education system that coordinates appropriate and seamless service from the Ministries and community service providers who work with children and youth during their pre-school to grade 12 educational journey.

The Inclusive Education Cross-Ministry Team will be advised by a Provincial Advisory Committee of representatives from Ministry stakeholders that support children, youth and their families. This committee will provide a perspective and understanding of how inclusion can best support success for all children and youth.

Timing

Moving towards an inclusive education system, as described in the *Setting the Direction Framework* and supported by the Government of Alberta's response to the framework, has taken considerable time. It will take even more time because, for many, the shift in thinking and practice is significant.

In September 2011, the first changes will begin to be put in place in a limited number of school communities and will focus on helping people, and particularly educators, understand what they can do to support student success in inclusive environments. This is often referred to as 'building capacity'. These changes will be well communicated, and will ensure we have time to learn from these first communities before we move to a province-wide implementation.

If you would like more information on Action on Inclusion please visit the Alberta Education website at www.education.alberta.ca or consider the Action on Inclusion parent question and answer document.